

Opening Statement – Dr. Mark Rockwell, D.C. on behalf
Of the Environmental Water Caucus
Panel B – Protecting, Restoring & Enhancing the Delta Ecosystem

On behalf of the Environmental Water Caucus, and our coalition of supporting organizations around California I want to thank the Council for this opportunity. Before we get into the weeds on specific questions provided from staff relative to the 2nd draft of the Delta Plan, I wanted to make some general comments. EWC member groups have discussed at length the importance of restoration efforts in the Delta, and we are convinced that without restoration and recovery of riparian and aquatic habitats, recovery of listed species would be impossible, and the over-all ecosystem would continue to struggle.

Habitat restoration is critically important, but resolving the water supply problems is of equal importance. For EWC member groups the legislatively mandate of reduced reliance on the Delta means reducing water diversions to below the average diversion levels of the past decade. We feel strongly that it is unrealistic, at least at this time, to think that restoration alone will recover the Delta, or to think that restoration will provide the ability to withdraw even more water from the system. The State Water Resources Control Board (SWRCB) Delta flow criteria was a scientifically derived look at what it would take to recover the aquatic public trust resources of the Delta. We would recommend that the Council recognize that flow standards are necessary for the Delta and its tributaries, and that the Delta Plan should provide the direction and mandate to the SWRCB to complete Delta and tributary standards in a reasonable time period.

We also recognize that the Delta ecosystem and its wildlife cannot be restored without major changes to the physical structure and operations of the Delta and its channel system. Re-connecting river channels to their floodplains, levee set-backs to provide for more shallow water habitat, and possibly enhancing available habitat within the Sutter and Yolo by-passes are examples. We recognize that we cannot return the Delta to its historic configuration, but we do know that if aquatic species recovery is to be achieved, some structural alterations will be necessary. Phasing of projects will be important, and developing a science based project priority list, and a timeline for accomplishment will be important to overall success. An example would be shallow water habitat restoration, which has been shown to provide shelter and favorable growing conditions for fish in general, and salmon in particular. We would recommend that this type of restoration be accomplished early in the process, while lower benefit projects could be done later. Lastly, we want to recommend that necessary funding be provided for post project evaluation and continued maintenance so completed projects do not lose effectiveness over time. Maintaining a completed project has associated costs, but is cheaper than having to repeat the project a second time.

Another area of concern for EWC member groups is that of toxicity. It is one of the three main drivers of the ecosystem decline identified by scientists, and continues to be problematic today. One can argue that there are numerous causes of toxic inflows to the Delta, but the leading source continues to be from non-point pollution coming from irrigated lands. Many of the pollutants are harmful to both humans and wildlife, and the state is failing to meet existing standards to protect Bay-Delta surface and ground water. Additionally, many of the current chemicals are very harmful to fish, pyrethroids are an example, but others like nitrogen, selenium and mercury are risks to humans and wildlife. In the Delta we focus on surface water issues, but many communities in the San Joaquin valley have groundwater contamination as a result of surface water pollution, and we have whole towns that cannot drink tap water as a result.

Lastly, we are concerned about in-Delta and up-stream interests and the ability of the council to mandate their involvement in all restoration efforts. Delta Counties and landowners must be full partners in developing and implementing habitat restoration programs so that a desirable mix of aquatic habitat restoration and sustainable agriculture is achieved. The same holds true for out of Delta counties and landowners where restoration is identified as beneficial to recovery.

In summary, we strongly recommend that the issues of restoration and water management are of equal importance, and recovery of the ecosystem is dependant on both being managed appropriately. Phasing of projects both for restoration and Delta structural change is important to ensure that those projects that have the greatest benefit for recovery are done early in the process, followed by lower value activities. Water quality has to be improved in surface water flowing into the Delta, and we ask the council to require the SWRCB to implement a new policy on non-point pollution flowing into Delta related watersheds. We also feel that Delta communities and landowners must be an integrated part of any restoration planning. They need to feel they are not going to be over looked, and that their interests are an important part of any decision making process.

Respectfully submitted,

DR. C. Mark Rockwell, D.C.
Environmental Water Caucus
Endangered Species Coalition
Nor. Calif. Council, Federation of Fly Fishers